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In From the Cold

Long Out of Fashion, Spy Agencies Now Get Priority in Washington

Administration Adds Agents And Analysts, Pays Heed To Once-Ignored Nations

But Is It Politicizing CIA?

By Gerald F. Seib
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON—Radio listeners in Atlanta may have been startled recently to hear a mellifluous voice saying, "We're the Central Intelligence Agency, looking for very special people to train for a career with us."

The announcer explained that if listeners could "make on-the-spot decisions, have initiative and self-reliance, are willing to live abroad," they could qualify for a job. The ad closed with these instructions: "Get in touch if you believe you are special enough for a career with the Central Intelligence Agency."

That ad and a similar one run in Salt Lake City represent the CIA's first effort to recruit new employes with broadcast advertising. And the Atlanta experiment, in particular, was a big hit. "It absolutely swamped us with responses," a CIA official says.

The commercials are just one sign that the Reagan administration has begun trying to make good on its promise to rebuild America's intelligence system. Both in radio and newspaper ads, the CIA is recruiting full-time analysts for duty either at its headquarters near here or at posts abroad. Overall, the administration has begun quietly increasing the intelligence system's secret budget by roughly the same rate as the Pentagon's 18% rise for fiscal 1983. Meanwhile, the CIA is assembling a five-year master plan for beefing up the intelligence community, which many in Congress now agree was worn thin by staffing and budget restraints during the 1960s and 1970s.

Emphasis on People

The Reagan administration's plans will make some broad changes in the way the U.S. intelligence system does its work in the 1980s. The emphasis will be on adding analysts and clandestine agents, after the recent heavy dependence on spy gadgetry for budgetary reasons. Many of the new people will be used to build up the CIA's knowledge about developing countries that promise to be the world hot spots in the 1980s. "If there is a broad, general underlying approach, it says you have to devote a lot of time and attention to understanding in depth countries that haven't been centers of attention in the 1970s," a senior U.S. intelligence official says.

At this point Congress and the public seem willing to support the administration's plans. But some lawmakers sound a warning. They say the new congressional consensus for rebuilding intelligence could be threatened by what some consider another trend: the Reagan administration's inclination to "politicize" the intelligence community to fit its policies.

Some lawmakers think politics, rather than a desire for objective intelligence, lies behind the appointment of some intelligence officials. And they charge that some recent CIA work has been tailored to fit administration views. Democratic Sen. Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts recently stormed out of a closed-door briefing on Central America, charging that the session had turned into a political harangue rather than a presentation of intelligence information.

The meeting was given by Constantine Menges, a conservative Latin American expert hired by the Reagan administration as the CIA's national intelligence officer for Latin America. Afterward, Sen. Tsongas and two other Democratic Senators sent a letter to CIA Director William Casey complaining that the meeting "bordered on policy prescription rather than a straightforward analysis of available intelligence data."

Some Senators suspected that the CIA's analyses of the administration's proposal to sell Awacs radar planes to Saudi Arabia were shaded to push the sale. Likewise, they objected when Mr. Casey ordered CIA analysts to rewrite a report on terrorism to include more emphasis on the Soviet role in international terrorism.

"It goes back to the whole question of whether we're going to have an agency giving what we need—unvarnished, unencumbered, straight facts," says Democratic Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Consensus on the Need

For now, though, the Reagan administration's big plans benefit from a new belief around Washington that the U.S. intelligence community was dangerously weakened in the 1970s. (The CIA, operating from its heavily wooded 219-acre headquarters site in Langley, Va., is the biggest, but far from the only, part of this community. The agency gathers and analyzes intelligence, but also coordinates the work of a dozen lesser intelligence agencies.)

Both budget and personnel figures for the intelligence community are secret. But one top intelligence official says that the number of people devoted to U.S. intelligence began a long and steady decline in 1967. By the mid-1970s, he says, almost one-third of the personnel devoted to intelligence in the 1960s had been lopped off.

Ray Cline, a former high CIA official, adds that from 1970 to 1974 U.S. spending on intelligence increased little if any. As a result, he says, inflation cut the real investment in intelligence by 33% to 50%.

Some of the reduction resulted from the end of the Vietnam war, which had required an intelligence buildup. But other factors were at work, too. Revelations of abuses by the CIA undercut congressional support for intelligence spending. Also, the intelligence agencies were hurt by the government-wide slashing of overseas personnel in the early 1970s in an attempt to stem the flow of dollars out of the U.S.

Both Democrats and Republicans now find large gaps in the nation's intelligence capabilities. "The U.S. intelligence system isn't able to deal with multiple crises, as we have experienced recently, without diverting resources from other high-priority missions," the Senate Intelligence Committee said in a recent report. "Moreover, in many areas of the Third World, coverage by the U.S. intelligence system is either marginal or nonexistent."

The CIA has suffered a "brain drain" of top analysts, Sen. Biden says. Its language abilities have declined; during the upheaval in Iran, a community-wide search turned up only two Farsi-speaking employes who could be put to work analyzing events there, a former official says. And because few new agents have been joining up, some two-thirds of the higher-ups in the CIA's clandestine services are technically eligible for retirement because they are more than 50 years old.

One area in which the U.S. intelligence system remains unparalleled is in spy technology. For example, the U.S. has satellites with cameras that can spot cars and trucks moving down roads; and it has spy planes with cameras that can easily distinguish objects less than a yard in diameter.

Under the Reagan administration's plans, this electronic wizardry will be developed further. But the initial emphasis will be elsewhere. "The intelligence program is trying to wean itself off the pattern of heavy investment in technical resources and denigration of other intelligence means," one White House official says.

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The Reagan administration thinks the human spy corps has been neglected because of the focus on electronics, and intelligence officials see several dangers in that trend. For one, spy satellites can detect movements but not policy intentions. During the Polish crisis, spy-satellite photos have told U.S. policy makers for months about the movement of Soviet and Polish troops, but only a human spy with access to government officials could tell the U.S. about political planning. In the end the U.S. didn't find out about the imposition of martial law until it was under way. What's more, after the martial-law crackdown, cloudy weather hampered the collection of intelligence from satellites over Poland for several days.

Vulnerability Issue

Satellites also will become increasingly vulnerable if the Soviet Union develops the ability to shoot them out of orbit. Ground-based eavesdropping devices are similarly vulnerable. "If the Carter program had continued, the President would have faced the prospect of catastrophic losses of intelligence if the enemy had the ability to stop the technical collections," a White House official says.

So the Reagan administration is starting to beef up the U.S. corps of intelligence agents overseas. But officials warn that training a spy is a long and painstaking process, so it will be several years before any big gains can be made.

Intelligence officials also believe that budget limits have left the CIA with too few analysts to interpret the vast amounts of information modern electronic spy systems can gather. And in some cases more analysts are needed simply to examine mounds of open material such as foreign newspapers. So the CIA is building up its staff of analysts to improve the quality of forecasts reaching policy makers. "I think probably the largest single increment of people is going to have to come in processing and analysis, even more than in human collection abroad," one senior official says. To accommodate its enlarged staff, the CIA has proposed constructing a new building that would roughly double the size of its headquarters.

Problems of Rebuilding

But the rebuilding effort hasn't been without its problems. While reorganizing its analytical operation, the CIA moved its Soviet analysts out of the Langley headquarters into offices in nearby Vienna, where they had more space, officials said. The move, made in mid-October, separated the Soviet analysts from the Polish analysts just before the Polish crackdown. "Communications between the Soviets and Poles may be more difficult in the U.S. intelligence system than it is over there," one official quips.

Furthermore, recent reorganizations aimed at efficiency have caused hard feelings among some top analysts and hurt morale among lower-level employes. "The quality and quantity of the product has fallen a bit" because of the shakeups, one career official says.

Although neither administration nor congressional officials will discuss details, both acknowledge that the Reagan administration is picking up where the Carter administration left off in building the CIA's abilities to conduct "covert operations" — undercover operations ranging from distribution of propaganda to efforts to unsettle unfriendly governments. Stansfield Turner, the director of central intelligence during the Carter administration, says the CIA had little more than "zero ability" to carry out covert operations when he took office, but he says the potential was built up "rather handily" during his term.

In general, Congress looks favorably on these moves. But many members nurse a growing suspicion that politics is spilling over into the operation of the intelligence system. The worries started with the appointment of Mr. Casey, who served as the Reagan campaign manager, and his subsequent appointment of a Reagan campaign aide, Max Hugel, to head the CIA's spy operations. (Mr. Hugel resigned after being accused of improper business practices.)

Since then, lawmakers have also suspected that politics affected the President's decision to reconstitute the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, a group of outsiders who offer advice on intelligence work. The board is weighted with conservative Republicans and includes President Reagan's friend Alfred S. Bloomingdale, a former chairman of Diner's Club, and Martin Anderson, who has just left his post as a top White House adviser. Also, Richard Allen became a part-time consultant to the board after his departure as the President's national-security adviser.

Some Senators remain bitter over Mr. Casey's hiring of Mr. Hugel and over the CIA chief's conduct during the Senate Intelligence Committee's investigation of his own finances. Congressional investigators found that Mr. Casey had failed to make a required disclosure of numerous investments, liabilities and law clients that included the governments of South Korea and Indonesia. Many committee members thought Mr. Casey was arrogant and less than candid with Congress.

"I would say it will continue to be a problem for certain members of the committee," says Republican Sen. David Durenberger of Minnesota, who adds that many of his own doubts about Mr. Casey have eased. "Bill's a salesman. He has been a salesman all his life, and one of the complaints about a salesman is that he doesn't always tell you everything that's in the package."

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